

Divided we exist: What do the 2022 US mid-term elections mean?

Ryan P. Walker gives his state-side view on the impact of the recent elections in the United States



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In a speech given just two-and-a-half years before South Carolina would be the first state to secede from the Union, then-US Senate candidate Abraham Lincoln famously stated that “a house divided against itself cannot stand”.

While in this instance, he was referring to the moral, legal, and social shame of the institution of slavery and the division it was creating within the Union, the metaphor—although in a converse fashion—can be extrapolated to the current state of affairs in the American political system.

Although Lincoln was promoting unity, our Nation has existed in a homeostatic state of division—albeit for the few instances of national unity during events like World War II and post-September 11. While internal strife has been the catalyst for the demise of other great nations and systems of government, our political division has led to productivity and the creation of durable public policy. According to a Pew Research Center analysis spanning over 30 years (1989-2020), four of the five most productive sessions of Congress took place while there was divided government.¹ The Reagan tax cuts of 1981 and 1986, Welfare Reform during the Clinton Administration, and, more recently, President Obama’s Affordable Care Act are just a few of the immediate examples of public policy which have stood the test of time. Thus, in a converse take on Lincoln’s famous quote, our “house”—our Republic—has stood the test of time and our divisions and differences have



ultimately made us stand stronger.

During the recent 2022 midterm elections, over 107 million people cast votes in elections for the US House of Representatives—meaning nearly a third of the total US population was engaged in the political process in a non-presidential election year.² Furthermore, with Republicans garnering just over 50 percent and Democrats around 48 percent of those votes, it demonstrates that the electorate is deeply divided and does not overwhelmingly favour one party over the other. Additional evidence to this point is that while Republicans narrowly regained control of the House, Democrats increased their majority in the Senate by one seat giving them sole control of the chamber, its committees, and subpoena power.

When the 118th Congress convenes on 3 January, the near-term effect of this partisan division will undeniably be gridlock, competing oversight and investigation agendas by the respective chamber’s majority party and posturing for forthcoming legislative battles. These battles will include items such as raising the nation’s borrowing limit (debt ceiling); reauthorization of the Farm Bill; the FY 2024 government funding process; US foreign military and economic assistance for Ukraine; energy and environmental policy; and many more issues in what will be a full docket of critical policy matters. However, both parties must tread carefully, especially with the 2024 presidential election cycle already underway. Each party will want to bring policy



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victories to voters without appearing to have given up too much to the opposition.

Yet, even before the two opposing political parties debate their policy differences, each party will have to successfully navigate the factions within their own caucuses. Republicans in the House of Representatives will have just a four-seat majority, providing the opportunity to both far-right conservative Freedom Caucus members and more moderate Republican Governance Group members to flex their political muscle to force their perspective on any legislative matter. This scenario sets the stage for difficult negotiations for whoever becomes the next Speaker of the House. Additionally, with a slim majority in the Senate, Democrats will be forced to negotiate intra-party disagreements amongst their progressive and moderate factions in order to help get as close as possible to the 60-vote filibuster

proof threshold required before seeking bipartisan support from Republican senators. Lastly, any bipartisan solutions on legislative matters must avoid a presidential veto by engaging the White House early and often throughout the process.

While much remains to be seen in regard to how the legislative process will play out with the new political dynamics, it is certain that media influence will play an outsized role on either side of any debate. Whether it be Fox News or MSNBC, the “same ones that sell the panic sell the cure”, especially in a presidential election cycle. As such, it becomes ever more important for citizens and business interests to engage the political and policy-making process to discern fact from fiction.

Despite the media noise, partisan bantering and electioneering, the American Republic is not falling apart in a way similar to that of the Roman

Republic. In fact, it is standing the test of time in a much more complex and global environment. Even though Congress has a scanty 21% approval rating, Thomas Jefferson reminds us that “the government you elect is the government you deserve”.³

Elections have consequences and, at this moment, the results of the 2022 midterm elections provide policymakers with the task of overcoming political polarization and enacting common-sense bipartisan solutions to the challenges we face. ■



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Footnotes:

- 1 See: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/02/03/single-party-control-in-washington-is-common-at-the-beginning-of-a-new-presidency-but-tends-not-to-last-long/>.
- 2 See: <https://www.cookpolitical.com/charts/house-charts/national-house-vote-tracker/2022>.
- 3 See: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1600/congress-public.aspx>.



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